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ABSTRACT

Much of the language and many constructs used in testing and assessment must be redefined in order for testing instruments to be valid for use with children of African-American descent. These children are products of unique linguistic environments. Current educational assessment tools are insensitive to the cultural-linguistic diversity of the American population. Misconceptions about English as a language and about African-American language are at the foundation of many standardized testing instruments. There are urgent needs in this country for a systematic cultural-linguistic review of testing and assessment devices to be used with African-American children, to provide full and competent descriptions of African-American language, to instruct teachers about specific techniques for teaching African-American children, and to end the sale of kits and gimmicks developed for teaching speakers of "black language." (Author/MK)

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LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND ASSESSMENT

by

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(National Institute of Education Conference,
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Teaching and learning are rooted in and are dependent upon language, a common language between teacher and student. Language is rooted in and is an aspect of culture. Culture is nothing more nor less than the shared ways which groups of people have created to use their environment. All people, every group of people on the face of the earth, has created culture. Therefore, they have also created language which is included in culture. Children all over the world learn to speak the language of their group at about the age of two. Teaching and learning is a world-wide phenomenon. It is as old as people - at least as far as any available records will show.

Teaching and learning are also rooted in environments which are shaped by politics. For example, the United States was created as a slave nation, complete with deliberate designs to prevent the education of slaves. The designs included measures that would curtail the behavior of teachers and learners, as well as measures that would create certain beliefs to justify that curtailment. We may review the documents which show just how pervasive was the influence of such academic disciplines as history, geography, religion, biology, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and linguistics in the creation of and teaching of racist belief (Chase, 1971), (Kamin, 1974). The legacy of those beliefs remains with us today, many wearing the cloak of scientific legitimacy. Africans were said by some historians to have had no history, by linguists to have had inferior language, by political scientists to have had poor self-government, by psychologists to have had low intelligence, by biologists to have had inferior genes, and by theologists to have had no soul, among other things. These views were enshrined in the scientific literature of recent decades. They were taught in universities and colleges. And so, through no fault of the slaves, unprovoked systematic and pervasive oppression was instituted and maintained with the help of those in education who were most responsible for freedom.

Language, Culture, Oppression, and African-Americans:

And so, we have before us today in the wake of the Ann Arbor decision, the issue of culture and assessment, among others. That issue must, however, be handled in terms of a total context. Language, culture, history, and oppression are inextricably linked together where African-American children are concerned. To attempt to analyze assessment practice by reference to language or culture alone will doom such analyses to failure in advance. Indeed, it might well result in data which supports beliefs and behaviors which would make matters worse than they already are for African-American children.

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Please note that I speak of African-American children and not "minority," "disadvantaged," "culturally or otherwise deprived," or even "Black," except as it is equivalent in meaning to African-American. The reasons for this are scientific rather than either ideological or political. Of the terms above, only the term "African-American" suggests the need to refer to children's antecedents and to cultural environmental experiences for explanations and interpretations of a group of people. For example, what are the historical antecedents of a "minority"? I intend to show that it is the failure to develop scholarship which takes history and culture into account that distorts scientific study. The failure to deal with the existence of oppression and its impact will result in a further distortion of study.

Perhaps it is the limited cultural experiences of so many United States scholars which renders cultural data "invisible." Perhaps at a deeper level, a sense of guilt about oppression and a sense of impotence to change the systems which serve those ends are at the base of the problem of how to make the healthy and normal experiences of African-Americans visible to investigators, without the typical retreat to assumptions of pathology among the children.

It cannot be denied that African-American children are not achieving at optimal levels in the schools of the nation. Neither can it be denied that there is a need for African-American children to learn languages and content other than that which many have already learned up to now. The real problem which the Ann Arbor decision forces us to confront is this: Can we be explicit about how professional practice can be made to perform the normal and expected function of facilitating the natural healthy learning processes of children? In particular, for this paper, how can the assessment process be purified so as to operate in the service of African-American children rather than against them?

For many years now, there are those of us who have charged that mass-produced standardized professional tests and materials are ill suited to the needs of most African-American children, in part because certain false assumptions are made about the children and their culture. Basically, the erroneous core assumption is that African-American children are nothing more than incomplete copies of Western-European white children, since the two groups of children in general are obviously not identical. Since they are not identical, African-American children are assumed to be deficient in European culture. When it is recognized that African-American children have a unique culture, that culture is usually seen as inferior to the Western-European culture. It is these general ideas which cause gross errors to be made in testing and assessment in four areas in particular:

1. Gross errors are made in testing the "mental ability" of African-American children.

2. Gross errors are made in testing the speech of African-American children.

3. Gross errors are made in testing the language of African-American children.

4. Gross errors are made in testing the reading ability of African-American children.

These errors are made because most professionals are ignorant of certain basic linguistic principles and of the history of "American English" and African-American speech. Therefore, professionals make mistakes when dealing both with English and with African-English speech. Let's look more closely.

Errors About Common American English:

1. English is immaculately conceived and is a pure language.

2. English is a superior language.

3. English is a fixed or permanent language.

4. English is essentially the same in all English speaking countries and in the United States.

5. English in America is uninfluenced by African-Language.

6. English is language, not simply a language.

The President's Commission on Foreign Language Study has already sounded the alarm about the poor language preparation of Americans and about the poor attitudes which Americans display toward other languages. Few Americans have been taught such simple things as how English really came to be. If they had been, chauvinistic attitudes toward language might be quite different.

According to Fromkin and Rodman (1972), Romans invaded Britain in the first century and dominated the Celts, previous conquerors of Britain. Britain's northern tribes, the Scots and the Picts, were attacking the Celts. Later as the power of Rome declined during the fifth century, the Romans left Britain. The Celts then hired Jute (Teuton) mercinaries to repel their old enemies, the Scots and the Picts. In 449 A.D., the Jutes won and decided to dominate the Celts themselves with the help of their cousins, the Angles and the Saxons, at which time baby English was born. Meanwhile, the Celts have now gone to Wales, Cornwall and France, and are speaking Welsh, Scottish, Gaelic, and Breton. For the next 600 years or so, English as spoken by the Germanic conquerors of Britain evolves, even while the German which is spoken back home also evolves, to the point where they are no longer mutually intelligible. In the eleventh century, 1066, William the Conqueror invades and conquers Britain and establishes French as the national language. English is still the language of the masses, but it is influenced by the French. By 1500, the British English

began to be quite similar to the English which is spoken in England today. And so, what is now English emerged as a polyglot language from the remnants of Celtic, Latin, the Germanic Jutes, Angles, and Saxons, and finally the French. The result is a language that is largely German in grammar and largely Romance in vocabulary. In fact, we could with some merit argue that English is "non-standard German." This is hardly a pure or immaculately conceived language. Demonstrably, it is not permanent or fixed and is only one of many languages. It would be difficult to demonstrate its superiority to any other language. Indeed, it was the linguist Benjamin Whorf, a scientist, who observed that the Hopi Indian language which he had learned was more suitable for sophisticated scientific thought than was his native English language. We will deal with the African influence in a few moments.

What we are left with then, is that English, common American-English, is simply a language of convenience. As a common language, it is efficient for the nation. Yet the approach to the teaching of English in our schools does not stop there. English is used to establish standards for esthetics and to establish a national cultural heritage. Instead of thinking of "standard" as common or ordinary, "standard English" is thought of as a standard of quality. The effect of this thinking is to subordinate any alternative and to attribute to alternatives the stigma of inferiority.

Errors About African-American Language:

To refer to the language of most African-Americans as "non-standard English" is to mislead people, since the implication is that all that is involved is a variant of English. And yet, like English, the language which is spoken by African-Americans is a fusion of languages which cannot be understood apart from an appeal to historical origins and to the oppression of slavery. Winnifred Vass (1979) has shown that only about 4.5% of the slaves that came from Africa were brought to the United States. Nearly half of the Africans who were enslaved were sent to South America, and 42% were sent to the Caribbean and to the Greater and Lesser Antilles. About 2% were sent to Europe and its environs. The remainder, about 2%, went to Canada and Central America. It is important to know that the 4.5% that came to the United States came mostly during the last fifty years of the slave trade, for this reason: By the end of the slave trade, West Africa had been heavily depopulated. Therefore, the bulls of the Africans were brought to the United States from Angola, with many Africans coming through Angola from as far away as Mozambique and South-East Africa on the coast! But the important thing for us to know is that the Africans who were brought to the United States were speakers of one or more of the Bantu languages. Further, one of the main things about the Bantu family of languages is that they covered the largest part of the African continent. Secondly, a well-known characteristic of Bantu languages is something that those who know them have called the "Bantu dynamic." That is to say, these languages exert a powerful influence on other languages. It tends to have tenacity and staying power. It is the retentions of this 'Bantu dynamic" which is picked up by Lorenzo Turner (1949).

Winifred K. Vass (1979), a resident of Zaire for over forty years and fluent in Tshiluba, a Bantu language, has described the "Bantu Dynamic":

> The cultural picture of the Bantu emphasizes a strong oral tradition which places supreme ethnographic value on an individual's ability to communicate impressively. The conquering process begun by metal spears was continued by a gift of speech so forceful that it was adopted by successive ethnic groups, which continued to exist as separate cultural and physical entities within the total Bantu pattern. The Bantu speech dynamic has asserted itself in a new setting, transported to this continent by Bantu-speaking slaves. The Afro-American has retained the deft canny power of communication which has enabled him to "use language in the contexts of the situations," to "manipulate and control situations to give himself the winning edge." (p. 102)

As Vass has shown, this"Bantu Dynamic" is not limited in its impact to the African Continent. In fact, the most highly visible oral culture in America today is the speech of lower-class African Americans. It may not be stretching the point to say that this is the only substamtive oral culture in America today.

> Today, Africans and Afro-Americans are a race of gifted speakers, though the motives for unexcelled speech performance have changed from the motive of sheer physical survival to motives expressing the deep psychological needs of the human personality. Completely uninhibited in his efforts to imitate a strange speech, the Bantu-speaking slave brought from Africa had the inner will to expression and the sensitivity to the human situation which furnish the basis for the greatest potential that every Afro-American has today, his own personal share of the Bantu past. Conscious of it or not, black and white Americans are the inheritors today of a rich cultural contribution: that tough, lusty, good-natured, and uncannily perceptive part of our speech which is our Bantu Heritage. (p. 103)

Vass documents the Bantu retentions in the speech of <u>both</u> Black and White Southerners. She identifies the names of many southern cities today which are Bantu in origin. She also identifies many Bantu words in the vocabulary of Southerners. She decodes such familiar songs as <u>Polly Wolly Doodle</u> and <u>Here We Go Loop de Loop</u>, which are shown to be freedom songs which are Bantu in origin.

Having lived in West Africa for six years, I can attest to a similar dynamic among people there. It is a common saying in Liberia, "Never let a Liberian man talk for himself in court. If you do, you will lose." I am

a witness to the fact that it is common for young children to recognize and speak two or more African languages and some English as well. I saw no evidence that "large lips and tongues," as early linguists had said, "were physical impediments to speech (Turner, 1949). I saw no evidence of genetic or linguistic inferiority among the thousands of African children that I observed in and out of school all over Liberia. I did find a strong oral culture where even young children were frequently excellent public speakers. It is clear that early linguists spoke out of their own ignorance of African language and culture, much the same as many did and still do about the language of African-Americans.

This historical, political and cultural information is important when we learn that many of the things which cause African-American children to be labeled as "poor readers," "dumb" (low intelligence), or as "speech impaired" is nothing more than the retained features of Bantu speech or speech from other African language families mixed with or fused into a form of common English (Alleyne, 1969), (Turner, 1949), (Vass, 1979). Ironically, some varieties of common English - i.e., White Southern speech - also is influenced by the "Bantu Dynamic." Certain vocabulary, phonetic patterns, and styles are integral to Southern speech unconsciously expressed.

It is important to note that the African retentions in the language of African-Americans cover all the features which go to make up language; i.e., vocabulary, phonology, grammar, etc. (Smith, 1978).

So, it should be clear that we are really talking about two amalgams when we speak of English or African-American speech. To realize this is to reduce the professional problem considerably. The language which is spoken by many African-Americans should simply be regarded as a "foreign" or "semi-foreign" language, and not as "pathological" or "deficient." The prime test of the "normalcy" of the language of a child is to compare the child's language to the environment within which it was learned. This simple test seems to have been overlooked by many test makers and linguists alike.

From the minimal information which has been presented above, it should be clear that any linguist or other student of the language of African-Americans will have serious deficiencies in their professional preparation if they are ignorant of the African cultural linguistic antecedents.

<u>The Practical Consequences of a Reorientation:</u>

The practical consequences of understanding these things are immense for testing and assessment. <u>Much of the language and many constructs in testing and assessment must be redefined or eliminated!</u> Much of the language and many constructs, and therefore assessment practice is inconsistent with and contradictory to valid cultural-linguistic principles. The things which I am about to mention are seldom discussed at any fundamental level among testing and assessment people. Standardization in

testing and assessment is incompatible with sophistication in cultural-linguistics. Yet testing and assessment, as we now see them in education, are rooted in and dependent upon language.

Let's take a look at some constructs which will prove to be absurd under the light of cultural-linguistic analysis:

- "Basic Word" List
- Word "Difficulty"
- "Vocabulary"
- "General Information"
- Standardized "Beginning and Ending Sounds"
- Standardized "Comprehension"

Standardized test makers assume that there is, in general, a unique correct answer to a given question or problem. If there is not a unique answer, if there can be multiple answers, then the scoring and analysis stystem disintegrates. This matter is fundamental! What I am asserting is a basic threat not only to biased testing and assessment of African-American children, but to the very foundation of testing and assessment for any child. The results of standardized testing favor children who speak common American English, simply because these children are able to respond to questions which are couched in a familiar language based upon familiar experiences. Since the "right children," upper class, wealthy tend to get the top scores, it is assumed that the I.Q., reading, speech, language acquisition, and other tests are valid. Test makers have no way of separating out from the achievement results of a priviledged child that part of the scores which is due to their special skill from that part which is due simply to growing up in the common white American culture. Because the results come out "right" or appear to have "face validity," the basic assumptions about what the testing and assessment process is supposed to be doing are left unexamined. Let's look more closely:

What are the criteria for the establishment of a "basic word list"? Is a "basic word list" something that all Americans can be expected to have had an equally likely chance to encounter? Is a "basic word list" a random sample of vocabulary from the total possible vocabulary pool? Is a "basic word list" a necessary vocabulary for communication in English? Can there be more than one "basic word list"? Is the "basic word list" simply a matter of the identification of words that have a high frequency of use? What does it mean not to be in possession of a knowledge of vocabulary in the "basic word list"?

In a study by Kersey(and Fadjo)(1971), the Dolch Common Noun List and the Dolch 220 Word List were compared to a word list from a population of Seminole Indian children. The children's words came from stories

used by third and fourth-graders. The Seminole word list contained 67.7% of the words on the Dolch 220 Word List. But it also contained 149 service words that were not on the list. The Seminole word list contained 63.2% of the words on the Dolch Common Noun List plus 189 nouns which were not on the Dolch list.

How is the educator to explain this? Is one list better than another? Is a child smarter if he or she knows one or the other lists? In short, the meaning of "basic word list" is ambiguous, with fatal results for standardized testing. To treat a single "basic word list" as universally valid is absurd.

Let's examine the concept of "word difficulty." Is a word "difficult" only because a few people know it? Is a word "easy" because many people know it? On many standardized test items, difficulty is determined by statistical methods. Yet it is not clear just what the nature of the difficulty is. The assumptions about "difficulty" are not explicated. Therefore, what is being tested, difficulty or familiarity?

What is "vocabulary"? There are tests of vocabulary in reading and intelligence. Notice the word "vocabulary" is unqualified. Is it Chicago vocabulary, a Bronx vocabulary, a Boston vocabulary, a Tennessee vocabulary? Is there a universal American vocabulary? If not, do we measure a person's vocabulary, or do we simply try to determine if a person has learned a particular vocabulary? Are we measuring vocabulary ability - the ability to learn words? What is the linguistic rationale for expecting all Americans to have the identical vocabulary? What are the criteria for item selection for a vocabulary test? What is a vocabulary test?

I could go on with a similar treatment of "general information," "beginning and ending sounds," and "comprehension." However, the point should be clear, the constructs are ambiguous and the specifications or items are arbitrary! Therefore, the mass production of standardized tests and assessment procedures to measure the behaviors implied by the constructs is in reality the production of mass confusion.

In general, we are faced with a rampant, unbridled ethnocentricism among the designers of standardized tests and assessment procedures for use with populations of diverse cultural groups. If tests are designed only as achievement measures, are content valid, and if the content is agreed to by clients, then there is little which should concern us. It is only when the detection of pathology is implied that we must call for superior accountability in testing. The cure for this ethnocentric malady must address the ethnocentrism more than the study and analysis of African-American children. William Labov's classic article, "The Logic of Non-Standard English," (1970), is

an excellent piece of work. He proves that "non-standard English," meaning "African-American language" has a logic. He didn't need to prove it to those who speak it. They have not changed. His work teaches the scholars who apparently have had a difficult time understanding African-American speech.

Urgent Needs:

It should be clear by now that "band-aids" will not do if the spirit of the Joiner decision is to be followed. We have major changes to make in the whole system of education. Some of them are as follows:

There is an urgent need for systematic cultural-linguistic review of all testing and assessment devices which are used with African-Americans. No existing instruments have been subjected to such a review by professionals who are competent in African-American cultural linguistics.

There is an urgent need to provide full and competent descriptions of the language which is spoken by African-Americans. This language must be described in its historical and cultural context, and not as a simple contrast to common American English.

There is little need to teach teachers specific techniques for teaching the African-American child. Teachers must be taught so that their total orientation toward language and cultural linguistic principles represents the best that we now know about the subject. It is not the bag of tricks but the general attitude of a teacher that is important. If an African-American child is seen as language deficient, we can show that the behavior of the teacher actually changes toward that child as compared to "normal" children. They will engage the child in communication less, and pay less attention to the child. It is this teaching behavior and not the language of the child, no matter how different, that creates the problem for learners.

It is urgent that steps be taken to prevent new hustlers from selling kits and gimmicks in response to the Joiner decision. We need no "Black language kits." The child's language presents no pedagogical problems. Cultural-linguistic review can show that this is true.

If chimpanzees (Warshoe at the Yerkes Primate Laboratory) can be taught to do American Sign Language, and if a chimpanzee can teach another chimpanzee to sign, and if a gorilla (Koko at Stanford) can earn a 90 on a human IQ test, then one would think that Black children could be taught to read by their teachers.

Septima Clark is the creator of "freedom schools" in eleven southern states. These schools were responsible for teaching reading to 12,000,000 potential voters who were illiterate. In a short period of time, the number of illiterates were reduced from 12,000,000 to about 12,000, radically altering voting patterns in the south. I asked

Septima Clark how she was able to accomplish such a feat. She responded, "I generally avoided using regular trained teachers." As a teacher educator, I was stunned. "Why would you do that?" I asked. She answered that often people who saw themselves as highly educated projected the idea to her students that they regarded themselves as better than the students. "Their education got in the way." Surely, there is a lesson in this for us, as we ponder the nature of our interventions to come.

Conclusion:

Who teaches error in linguistic understanding? How do they do it? It is done in many subtle ways in everything from linguistic departments, to English classes, to teacher behavior, and to the mass media. We are faced with nothing less than the need to re-educate our nation to the truth about language. The Ann Arbor decision will have accomplished little if the problem is not seen in its broadest scope. We need no more analyses of the African-American child. We need to renovate the system which teaches error. We have the tools to do the job. Do we have the will?

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